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SUBJECT: TRIBAL/OPPOSITIONAL DIMENSIONS OF EAST SUDAN:
VISIT TO KASSALA

REF: KHARTOUM 1018

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Eric Whitaker, Reason: Section 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: From April 11-13, Poloff and AF/SPG DeskOff met with government officials, opposition parties, tribal leaders, NGOs, and UNMIS in Kassala to discuss the political and humanitarian situation in Eastern Sudan. This is the second of two cables (see reftel) to discuss the political and tribal/oppositional dimensions in Eastern Sudan. There is a lack of communication between opposition leaders inside Sudan and those based in Asmara, and a testy union between the Rashaida Free Lions and the Beja Congress. Tribal leaders predicted that once the SPLA withdrew from Hamesh Koreib, the Beja Congress and Sheik Suleiman's People's Defense Forces (PDF) would clash over the area. The opposition leaders highlighted an increase in the detainment of their leaders in the past month and a growing conflict between the Rashaida and Beja tribes over land. In the Rashaida Free Lions peace accord with the Sudanese government in December 2005, the government reportedly gave the Rashaida land in Eastern Sudan. End Summary.

Governor's Advisor: Eastern Front Union Testy

¶2. (C) Ahmed Tirik, advisor to the Governor of Kassala State, described the Eastern Front alliance as "testy", because the only issue the two parties had in common was their joint opposition to the Sudanese government. Furthermore, he said that there are problems between the Beja and Rashaida tribes because the Rashaida are demanding ownership of Beja lands, and a nasir (a title granted to a traditional leader whose tribe owns land). Tirik elaborated, saying that most of the major indigenous tribes of the East own their land; however, the Rashaida are considered foreigners because of their historical ties to Kuwait. According to the Beja, the Rashaida are therefore not entitled to own land.

¶3. (C) Tirik predicted that the Beja Congress and Sheik Suleiman's militia (PDF) would resort to an armed struggle after the SPLA withdrew from Hamesh Koreib. He confirmed that the government was providing arms to the militias in the East, and referred to them as "testy." He added that, although he is a National Congress Party (NCP) member, he describes himself as a "floater", because the only way to secure services for the Beja people is to join the government.

Free Lions: Increased Confusion, Frustration, and Tension

¶4. (C) Secretary General of the Free Lions within Sudan, Ali Abdel Hameed Ahmed, an economics graduate from Kassala University in 2005, outlined that the Eastern Front needed a

program for the East, institutional capabilities inside Sudan, and increased coordination between its leaders. He said there is a growing disconnect within the Eastern Front, between the internal and external leaders, and between the military and political wings. Ahmed said that the Eastern Front has expanded to include the Maneseer Opposition, a Northern opposition group opposed to the construction of the Merowe dam. In an effort to broaden its support base, the Eastern Front outside Sudan has recruited the Shokriya ethnic group; however, there was no coordination with the Shokriya inside Sudan.

15. (C) Ahmed said that the Rashaida Free Lions within Sudan were not consulted nor have they seen the dividends of the December 2005 agreement between Rashaida Free Lions President Mabrook Salim and the Sudanese government. (Note: Reportedly, the Rashaida were granted land through the deal; however, the Rashaida tribe and the Free Lions appear unaware of this aspect of the deal, demonstrating the disconnect between the external and internal Free Lions. End note.) In his opinion, neither Libyan President Qaddafi nor the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) is committed to solving the Eastern problem. Ahmed reported that tensions in Kassala have increased over the last two months due to the increase in military intelligence and rising anger by youths due to their constant harassment.

Beja Congress in Kassala; Constant Detainment

16. (C) Poloff scheduled a meeting with the Kassala-based Beja Congress leader, Muhammed Jaffer; however, after speaking with Embassy personnel, he was detained by security. He and his fellow four Beja Congress members were released two days

KHARTOUM 00001019 002 OF 002

later. According to other Beja Congress members in Kassala, Jaffer was arrested because he crossed "the red line" by speaking with U.S. Embassy personnel and the UN. In Kassala, Poloff and Deskoff spoke with Khartoum-based Beja Congress member Mohamed Oshake, who recounted that since March the anti-smuggling police have searched and harassed Beja Congress members. He described the anti-smuggling police as military intelligence forces wearing special military uniforms and driving vehicles without license tags. Oshake said there was a debate between the military and political wing of the Eastern Front about whether to use a military or a political strategy to combat the Sudanese government. When questioned about the future of Hamesh Koreib, Oshake expressed his personal view that it was essential that the Beja Congress retain control of that region. However, he added that the Eastern Front had not yet determined its plans for Hamesh Koreib once the SPLA withdrew. In a separate conversation with the nasir of the Beni Amir tribe, El Sheikh Ali Digili, the leader stated that he believed there would be an unavoidable conflict between Betai's PDF forces and the Beja Congress because Betai will not accept the re-occupation of Hamesh Koreib by the Beja Congress.

Rashaida Traditional Leader: The Free Lions and Our Land

17. (C) The chief of the Rashaida tribe was visiting Kuwait at the time of our visit. In a meeting with umda (deputy chief) of the Rashaida tribe, Hamid Ahmed Hameed El Negashi, he recounted that the Rashaida created the Free Lions in 1993 to protest the government's confiscation of its vehicles and goods. Negashi stressed that the Rashaida wanted land, schools, jobs, and participation in the government. He said that there was no conflict between the Rashaida Free Lions and the Rashaida umdas, and that the Rashaida Free Lions could negotiate with the government on behalf of the tribe. However, he added that the umdas should participate in the negotiations because they are closer to the people.

18. (C) Negashi said "if we have lived more than 120 years on

the land, how can we have no land?" Although land is a major issue to Eastern Sudanese, the umda downplayed its importance by saying that no one owns land in Eastern Sudan because it all belongs to the government. However, according to local sources, the land issue is the main problem between the Beja and Rashaida tribes, because without land the Rashaida are not viewed as important in the East.

19. (C) Negashi highlighted that the Rashaida have a strong relationship with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, and Libya, with a delegation from the National Assembly in Kuwait visiting the Rashaida in November 2005. Negashi commented that although the Free Lions signed an agreement with the Sudanese government, there was no clear indications on the ground that a peace deal had been reached. Regarding the Free Lions and Beja Congress union, Negashi said that the relations were fine now; however, the future relationship is uncertain.
STEINFELD